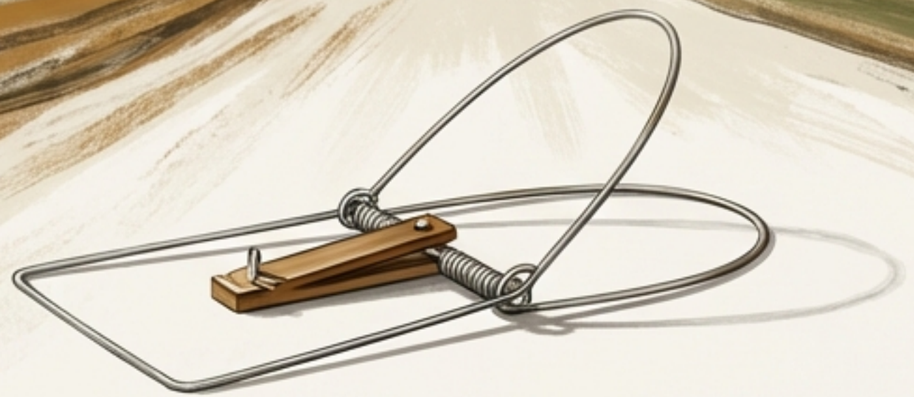
The Sower and The Four Herds

A Parable of Freedom and the Snares of Existence



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The Sower’s Deception

“A sower does not sow seed for deer thinking, ‘May the deer, enjoying this seed, be long-lived and beautiful.’ A sower sows seed for deer thinking, ‘When these deer encroach on where I sow the seed, they’ll recklessly enjoy eating it. They’ll become indulgent, then they’ll become negligent, and then I’ll be able to do what I want with them.’”

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Decoding the Parable

The Sower

Represents **Māra the Wicked**, the personification of temptation and the forces that bind beings to worldly existence.

The Seed

Represents **The Five Kinds of Sensual Stimulation**, the worldly pleasures that lead to attachment and suffering.

The Deer

Represents **Ascetics and Brahmins**, all spiritual seekers attempting to find a path to liberation.

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Journey 1: The Path of Reckless Indulgence

The Parable

Action: "The first herd of deer encroached on the seed and 'recklessly enjoyed eating it.'"

Outcome: "They became indulgent, then negligent. The Sower was able to 'do what he wanted with them.' They failed to get free."

The Meaning

Action: "The first group of ascetics engaged with worldly pleasures and 'recklessly enjoyed eating it.'"

Outcome: "They became indulgent, then negligent. Māra was able to 'do what he wanted with them.' They failed to get free."

Result: Trapped by Heedlessness.

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Journey 2: The Path of Extreme Denial

The Parable

Action: "The second herd refrained from the seed altogether, retreating to the wilderness."

Outcome: "In the summer, grass and water ran out. Their bodies grew thin, they lost strength, and returned to the seed, where they were trapped."

The Meaning

Action: "The second group of ascetics refrained from worldly pleasures, surviving on herbs, wild rice, scum from boiling rice, grass, or cow dung."

Outcome: "Their bodies grew thin, they lost strength and energy, and 'lost their heart's release.' They returned to Māra's seed and were trapped."

Result: Weakened and Forced Back into the Snare.

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Journey 3: The Path of Intellectual Proximity

The Parable

Action: "'The third herd set up their lair close by, eating the seed 'without being reckless.'"'

Outcome: "The Sower, curious about these 'sneaky' deer, surrounded the seed with high nets and discovered their lair. They were trapped."

The Meaning

Action: "The third group of ascetics engaged with the world cautiously, but held speculative views, such as: 'The cosmos is eternal,' 'The soul and the body are one and the same,' or debating what happens to a realized one after death.'"

Outcome: "These unresolved philosophical positions became the 'nets' that trapped them. They failed to get free from Māra's power."

Result: Discovered and Trapped by Speculation.

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Journey 4: The Path of Wise Engagement

The Parable

Action: “The fourth herd set up a lair where the Sower and his helpers ‘can’t go.’ From there, they ate the seed without becoming indulgent or negligent.”

Outcome: “The Sower could not find their lair. Fearing they would disturb other herds, he left them alone. They escaped his power.”

The Meaning

Action: “The fourth group of ascetics established a ‘lair’ where Māra and his assembly ‘can’t go.’ From there, they engaged with worldly pleasures without becoming indulgent or negligent.”

Outcome: “They got free from Māra’s power.”

Result: Freedom through a Transcendent Refuge.

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Three Paths to Bondage

1. Reckless Indulgence

Leads to negligence and capture.

2. Extreme Asceticism

Leads to weakness and an inevitable return to the snare.

3. Intellectual Speculation

Creates subtle ‘nets’ of attachment, preventing true escape.

All three represent a failure to escape the Sower’s domain.

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Where is the Lair that Māra Cannot Go?

“It’s when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the **first absorption**, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing the mind and keeping it connected.

This is the first step in building a refuge beyond the Sower’s reach.

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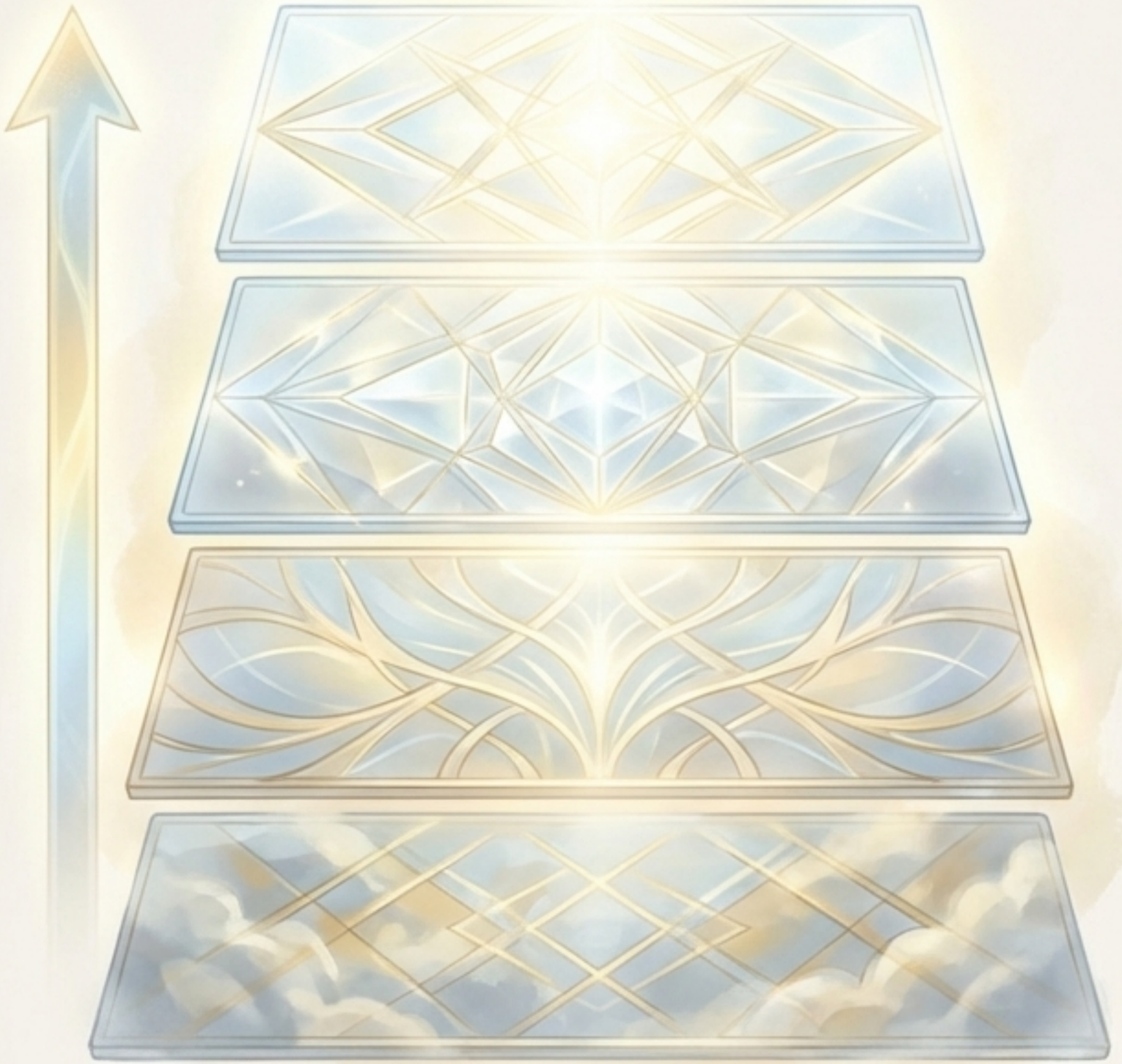
The Ascent Through Form: The Four Absorptions



Fourth Absorption

Entered by giving up pleasure and pain. Characterized by **pure equanimity and mindfulness, without pleasure or pain**.

Third Absorption

Entered as rapture fades. Characterized by **equanimity, mindfulness, and the bliss of which the noble ones declare**.

Second Absorption

Entered as the mind stills. Characterized by **rapture and bliss born of immersion**, with internal clarity.

First Absorption

Entered through seclusion from sensual pleasures. Characterized by **rapture and bliss born of seclusion**.

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The Ascent Beyond Form: The Formless Dimensions

Dimension of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception

Going totally beyond nothingness.

Dimension of Nothingness

Going totally beyond infinite consciousness, aware that “there is nothing at all.”

Dimension of Infinite Consciousness

Going totally beyond infinite space, aware that “consciousness is infinite.”

Dimension of Infinite Space

Going totally beyond perceptions of form, aware that “space is infinite.”

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The Summit of Liberation

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, **enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling.**

And, **having seen with wisdom, their defilements come to an end.**

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Blinding the Adversary

This is called a mendicant who has **blinded Māra**, put out his eyes without a trace, and gone where the Wicked One cannot see.

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Four Strategies, One Outcome of Freedom

	Path 1: **Indulgence**	Strategy: Unrestrained consumption.	Outcome: Trapped
	Path 2: **Denial**	Strategy: Total avoidance and self-mortification.	Outcome: Trapped
	Path 3: **Proximity**	Strategy: Cautious engagement with intellectual analysis.	Outcome: Trapped
	Path 4: **Transcendence**	Strategy: Wise engagement from an unassailable inner refuge.	Outcome: Freedom

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The Freedom to Engage, Not Just to Escape

The true victory is not in starving, but in developing a refuge so complete that one can “enjoy eating without being reckless.” It is the freedom gained by one who has...

...crossed over clinging to the world.

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